

Universal School Meals Program Act

Sen. Bernie Sanders, Rep. Ilhan Omar, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, and
Rep. Gwen Moore

Bill Summary

Provides Free Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner, and a Snack to All School Children

In the richest country in the world, no child should be denied a school meal because they can't afford to pay. The USDA estimates that [12 million children](#) in the United States lived in food insecure homes at the height of the pandemic. By offering universal school meals this past year, schools across the nation have played an important role in combatting the spike in child hunger caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Through a combination of federal waivers, many schools for the first time were able to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students regardless of their income. [New research](#) finds medium and large schools actually saw cost savings while maintaining nutritional standards through this universal model. The USDA recently [announced](#) it will extend these waivers for the 2021-2022 school year and continue to provide meals to all students for free.

While the extension of these short term waivers will come as a relief to many families, without a permanent solution to provide free meals to all students, schools will eventually have to revert to the complicated myriad of paper work and programs—where only some kids get to eat for free. Our bill provides a way for schools to provide the best and most cost-effective model for feeding all students.

The Universal School Meals Program Act would provide free breakfast, lunch, and dinner to every student—without demanding they prove they are poor enough to deserve help getting three meals a day. If the pandemic waivers are allowed to expire, many students from homes with incomes just above 130 percent of the poverty line, \$34,450 for a family of four, will not be able to receive free meals at school. Unfortunately, not all eligible students participate in the program due to a variety of reasons including [burdensome application paperwork](#) and [stigma](#). It is time to build off of the success of the universal meals structure in place during this pandemic and eliminate the stigma some children fear of being labeled “poor” by their classmates once and for all. Every child deserves to eat.

Prior to the pandemic, school participation rates in the universal school meals program more than doubled from 2014 to 2018. This legislation builds off that success and offers major benefits to students, families, public schools, and communities. Studies show that students with access to free breakfast have [improved attendance rates](#) and [perform better in school](#). Free and accessible school meals have also shown to [reduce financial stress](#) for students and families, [improve health outcomes](#) in students, [reduce stigma](#) associated with the programs, and lead to fewer behavioral incidents and [lower suspension rates](#).

Offering universal school meals benefits students and their parents, teachers, and schools. Multiple studies show that students with access to free breakfast have [improved attendance rates](#) and [perform better in school](#). Universal school meals has been shown to [increase overall participation rates](#). One study found that [98% of school staff](#) said universal meals reduced financial stress for students and

families. Other studies have shown that children with access to universal schools meals have improved [health outcomes](#). Parents will not be troubled with redundant paperwork or, as we have seen in recent months, subjected to threats to have their [children taken away](#) or saddled with [burdensome debt](#). Teachers, who rank [hunger as a top three priority](#) in children's health, and school administrators can expect fewer behavioral incidents and lower [suspension rates](#).

Puts an End to School Lunch Shaming

As we have seen in recent news reports, children have been publicly shamed for not being able to afford lunch, and as [USDA reported](#), lunch shaming is a problem throughout the country, including withholding grades for school meal debt. Some schools resorted to heinous scare tactics to collect school meal debt; one school [threatened to take away](#) parents' children and another school marked children's skin with an ["I Need Lunch Money"](#) stamp. Our bill would prohibit federally funded schools from denying any child a prepared hot lunch or breakfast.

Increases the Reimbursement Rate for School Meals

Current reimbursement rates are insufficient to cover the cost of producing meals. Our bill increases the reimbursement rates in line with USDA's estimated [cost of producing meals](#) to \$2.72 for breakfast and \$3.81 for lunch and dinner. [A new study](#) also found that schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) to provide universal meals at their school spent 67 cents less per lunch than schools that do not participate, but qualify for CEP.

Provides an Additional Incentive for Local Food Procurement

Including local foods in school meals protects and promotes small family farms, enriches local economies, and provides nutritious ingredients for our kids. Every dollar spent on local food generates over [two dollars in local economic activity](#). Local food programs provide hands-on education about proper nutrition, regional crops, traditional Native foods, farming techniques, and environmental stewardship. That is why our bill provides an incentive up to \$0.30 per meal for schools that procure 25 percent of their food from local sources. The bill defines local as food produced within state lines or within 250 miles of the purchasing School Food Authority. If all schools met the 25 percent local food criteria for school meals, it would provide local farmers with an additional \$3.3 billion in income per year, a 28 percent increase in local food sales—an enormous investment for our rural communities.

Reimburses Schools for All Delinquent School Meal Debt

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, [seventy-five percent](#) of school districts reported carrying school lunch debt, which in some cases can be hundreds of thousands of dollars. Other parents whose children are eligible to receive free meals have ended up in [burdensome debt](#) simply because of clerical errors. This bill would reimburse schools for all of their delinquent debt and stop the harassment of parents and students.

Provides Summer Meals to All Children and Summer EBT to Lower-Income Children

Almost [30 million children](#) in this country rely on free or reduced-price lunch. When the school year ends, families who rely on these programs do not magically make more money, their bills do not

disappear for three months, and they are all too often forced to choose between housing and food. The Summer Food Service Program provides an opportunity for children to enjoy healthy meals with their peers during the summer months. Currently, only communities where 50 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch may operate a summer meals program. Our bill makes all communities eligible regardless of income.

While community meal sites provide an excellent opportunity for children to eat a healthy meal together, many parents, particularly in rural areas, struggle to get their children to a meal site. That is why our bill provides an additional \$60 per month per child on EBT cards to help families in need purchase food during the summer months. The Summer EBT Program has proven to be effective in reducing hunger and improving nutrition. According to a USDA report, the program has reduced the most severe forms of food insecurity by [a third](#). The report also found that children in households receiving these benefits ate more nutritious food, consuming [one third of a cup more of](#) fruits and vegetables than those in households not enrolled in the program.

Strengthens and Expands the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

Our bill expands the number of allowable meal services for child care providers to three meals and a snack per day; this third meal will ensure children get the food they need while their parents are at work.

CACFP can be overly burdensome for child care providers and families. Currently, child care providers that wish to be reimbursed at the highest rate for must track the participating families' incomes or operate in areas where 50 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Our bill would eliminate the two tiered reimbursement rate for CACFP and allow child care providers to receive the highest reimbursement rate regardless of income.

Empowers Schools to Collect Title I Funding Information from Existing Resources

For years, schools have relied on free and reduced-price lunch information to qualify for Title I funding. Title I is essential to help schools provide additional resources to low-income kids. We empower schools to collect relevant data using existing resources and without putting the burden on individual families to report their income.